

THE BOOK REPORT

American Folkhero Makes It in Laos

BY JOHN WEISMAN

MISTER POP: The Adventures of a Peaceful Man in a Small War by Don A. Schanche (David McKay; illustrated. \$7.95).

There is a whole lot about our involvement with Southeast Asia that we cannot be proud of. The specter of American imperialism is never a pretty image to conjure up, and despite protesta-

gray beard on his face, and suffered from malaria and jungle pneumonia. But more than just existing on the same level as the Meo tribesmen, Buell gained universal respect by being one of the few Americans to keep his word to the people. And to do so, he fought with the policies of the CIA, OSS, AID and other alphabetically oriented secret organizations that represented U.S. "interests" in Laos. He often went unarmed into Pathet Lao-held territory, trusting that he, a peaceful man, would be protected by "his" tribesmen. And he was.

Laotian Title

In short, he earned a hundred times over his honorific Laotian title of "Tan Pop," which, roughly translated, means "grandfather who descends from above."

Don Schanche's book is a fast-moving, well-written account of Pop Buell's experiences in Laos. Schanche brings Buell to life, following his treks through the wild backcountry, eavesdropping on minor conversations, drinking bouts and a lot of hard, country cussin'.

Buell emerges as the kind of American folkhero that we need more of these days. A pragmatist who trades in opium when he has to, the American grandfather who cared enough about human beings to act out his concerns, brings a kind of humanism to the American character we haven't seen much of in recent years.

In his unique person-to-person dealings with the Laotians, "Mister Pop" makes his own small step for man, and as well, provides a universal leap forward for mankind.

Robert Kirsch, Times book critic, is on vacation. Today's guest columnist is John Weisman, a regular book reviewer for Calendar magazine.

tions from the Nixon Administration, a lot of people have been doing some embarrassing conjuring these days.

Yet there is another side to the American story; one that should make us all prouder to be Yankees. It's "Mister Pop," the story of Edgar Buell, a retired farmer from Indiana who, to "get away from it all," found himself a job as an agricultural adviser in Laos, for \$65 a month.

Learned Meo

Unlike most American advisers in Indochina, Buell didn't live in an air-conditioned headquarters, venturing among the people once or twice a month doling out funds to the local bureaucrats to squander on the black market. The tough little man from Indiana learned to speak Meo, the local Laotian dialect, and truly got to know the "folks" in the backwoods.

He ate chicken brains with them, drank their local brand of rotgut rice whiskey, walked and stank with them. He wore torn trousers and ragged tennis shoes, usually had a week's growth of stubbly,

MORI/CDF